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Message Text

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ACTION EA-09

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 COME-00 EB-08 INR-07 LAB-04
NSAE-00 SIL-01 L-03 /033 W
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R 270643Z APR 77
FM AMEMBASSY CANBERRA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 0284
INFO AMCONSUL SYDNEY
AMCONSUL PERTH
AMCONSUL BRISBANE

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FROM LABOR/POLITICAL OFFICER

EO 11652: NA
TAGS: ELAB, AS
SUBJ: TRANSPORT WORKERS STRIKE (450 MEN DEMOBILIZING VICTORIA).
PROVIDES LOOK AT SOME OF REALITIES UNDERLYING FAILURE
TO ACHIEVE "VOLUNTARY" WAGE AND PRICE FREEZE

1. VICTORIAN BRANCH OF TRANSPORT WORKERS UNION (TWU) CALLED STATE-WIDE STRIKE APRIL 15 IN SUPPORT OF COMPREHENSIVE LOG OF CLAIMS FIRST PRESENTED TO EMPLOYERS (BP, SHELL AND OTHER OIL COMPANIES) IN 1976. STRIKE INVOLVES ABOUT 450 TANKER DRIVERS AND REFUELERS (OR JUST UNDER ONE-FIFTY OF TOTAL OF ABOUT 2500 WORKERS IN THESE CATEGORIES IN COUNTRY). LOG OF CLAIMS INCLUDES LONG-PENDING DEMANDS FOR FULL CPI-BASED WAGE INCREASES, EMPLOYER PAYMENT OF MEDIBANK LEVY AND RANGE OF OTHER IMPROVEMENTS IN WAGES, WORKING CONDITIONS AND FRINGE BENEFITS. EMPLOYERS HAVE REFUSED TO GRANT PRINCIPAL DEMANDS ON GROUNDS INTER ALIA THAT DOING SO WOULD VIOLATE ARBITRATION COMMISSSION'S WAGE GUIDELINES AND, WOULD WORSEN INFATION. TWU HAS PRESENTED SIMILAR LOGS OF CLAIMS IN OTHER STATES BUT SO FAR HAS LIMITED STRIKE ACTION TO VICTORIA.
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2. DESPITE PERSISTENT EFFORTS TO RESOLVE DISPUTE VIA CONCILIATION AND ARBITRATION USING GOOD OFFICES OF ARBITRATION COMMISSION AND ACTU, AS OF APRIL 26 STRIKE WAS STILL IN EFFECT (UNION MEMBERS HAVING VOTED 231 TO 108 APRIL 22 TO REJECT LATEST SETTLEMENT PROPOSALS) AND TEN-DAY FAILURE TO REPLENISH PETROL SUPPLIES AT SERVICE STATIONS HAD CAUSED MOST

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PUMPS TO RUN DRY. NEGOTIATIONS ARE CONTINUING AT ARBITRATION COMMISSION BUT STRIKING TWU MEMBERS WHO MUST VOTE ON WHETHER OR NOT TO ACCEPT SETTLEMENT PROPOSALS NOT SCHEDULED TO MEET AGAIN UNTIL APRIL 29. IN MEANTIME, FEDERAL GOVT HAS PUBLICLY URGED OIL COMPANIES NOT TO GIVE IN TO UNION DEMANDS AND HAS OFFERED TO SUPPORT STATE GOVT ACTIONS AIMED AT MAINTAINING ESSENTIAL SERVICES.

3. JUXTAPOSITON OF LONG-POSTPONED SHOWDOWN BETWEEN TWU AND OIL COMPANIES WITH FRASER GOVT'S MOST RECENT ATTEMPT TO REDUCE REAL WAGES-THIS TIME WITH "VOLUNTARY" WAGE AND PRICE FREEZE-POINTS UP AT LEAST TWO VERY IMPORTANT FACTS OF LIFE IN MID-1977 AUSTRALIA: FIRST, THAT NAME OF GAME IN INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IS NOT SO MUCH "CONSENSUS" AS "CONFRONTATION"; AND SECOND, THAT EVEN WITH UNEMPLOYMENT AT RECORD POST-WORLD WAR II LEVELS, TRADE UNIONS IN SEVERAL KEY SECTORS HAVE POWER (IF THEY CHOOSE TO USE IT) TO BACK THEIR CLAIMS FOR BETTER WAGES AND CONDITIONS WITH EFFECTIVE INDUSTRIAL ACTION.

4. PREDICTABLY, FEDERAL GOVT OFFICIALS, EDITORIAL WRITERS AND OTHERS HAVE BLAMED PETROL SHORTAGE IN VICTORIA ON FEW HUNDRED "SELFISH" AND "IRRESPONSIBLE" TRADE UNIONISTS RATHER THAN ON INTRANSIGENT EMPLOYERS. THIS RAISES QUESTION OF WHAT UNIONS IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES SHOULD DO WHEN THEY FIND THAT THEIR ECONOMIC GOALS AND PRIORITIES CONFLICT WITH THOSE OF EMPLOYERS AND/OR GOVTS. SHOULD THEY DEFER TO "HIGHER" AUTHORITY AND SACRIFICE THEIR GOALS ON ALTAR OF NATIONAL CONSENSUS OR PUBLIC INTEREST OR SHOULD THEY USE THEIR
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MUSCLE TO MAKE BEST POSSIBLE DEAL FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR MEMBERS? FRASER GOVT HAS BETRAYED NO PERCEPTIBLE DOUBT ABOUT ITS ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION AND IS NOW IN PROCESS OF MOVING FROM EMPHASIS ON VOLUNTARY COMPLIANCE WITH ITS WAGE AND RELATED POLICIES TO MANDATORY COMPLIANCE VIA RECENTLY PROOSED AMENDMENTS TO TRADE PRACTICES AND CONCILIATION AND ARBITRATION ACTS.
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